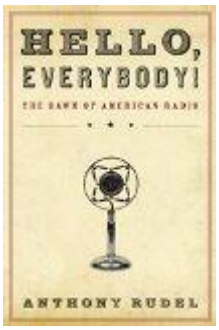
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anthony J. Rudel. *Hello, Everybody!: The Dawn of American Radio.* Orlando: Harcourt, 2008. 399 pp. $26.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-15-101275-6.



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Early Radio, Glossed Over

This casually written book, from a long-time radio professional who has also written about classical music, outlines the history of American radio from the beginning of the twentieth century until World War II. Rudel touches upon a great many issues in the narrative, including the friction between amateur operators and the military during World War I, the explosive growth of broadcasting in the 1920s, and the ongoing issue of governmental regulation. In the middle portion of the book, the topics of sports, politics, and variety programs each warrant their own chapter. The narrative is presented chronologically, with the outlandish exploits of quack doctor and border-radio pioneer Dr. John Brinkley woven throughout as a unifying theme.

To critique the book for its numerous errors and sloppy scholarship would be easy, but not entirely appropriate. The book does feature a bibliography and almost forty pages of endnotes, but Rudel did not write this book for academic audiences or serious historians. This work is instead intended for casual readers with little or no previous knowledge of the subject matter.

To cite one error, when writing about the young wireless operator David Sarnoff, Rudel states that “legend has it, [he] remained at his post for seventy-two consecutive hours” listening to distress signals from the doomed *Titanic* (p. 15). Well, yes, that was indeed the legend that Sarnoff himself promoted later in life, but the historical record indicates that his role in the *Titanic* tragedy was grossly overstated. Rudel’s inclusion of this hoary chestnut, without any qualification whatsoever, is puzzling since he cites Kenneth Bilby’s 1986 Sarnoff biography, *The General*, a few times in the text; this earlier book offers a detailed examination and refutation of the Sarnoff-*Titanic* story. Rudel nonetheless repeats the legend and makes subsequent references to it, as if it were indeed true. This one example is indicative of a persuasive tendency of the book, in which nuances

and subtle distinctions are glossed over in favor of hyperbolic prose.

A serious examination of the bibliography finds countless gaps and oversights. For virtually every subject that Rudel deals with, such as the popularity of *Amos 'n' Andy* or the diffusion of radio receivers among farmers, there are well-researched monographs or scholarly articles that offer far more insight (and research) than what is presented here. Rather than rely upon the vast and growing literature on early radio, Rudel instead relied upon secondary, summary works, such as Erik Barnouw's *A Tower in Babel* (1966)and George Douglas's *The Early Days of Radio Broadcasting* (1987), works that are now more than forty and twenty years old respectively.

Rudel did do a modest amount of research to produce this book and mined old issues of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* to find various nuggets of information that are sprinkled throughout the text. One suspects that he chose these two papers because they are well indexed and easily searchable online. The citations for the various news stories that he incorporates, though, are frustratingly incomplete, and provide only the date of the original newspaper. Having the actual title of the original article, or better yet, a page number, would make it much easier for a subsequent researcher to consult the same resource.

The book thus offers no significant original research, and the barest modicum of critical insight. A two-page "author's note" at the end of the narrative claims that there are many parallels between early radio and the growth of modern media technologies, and on this point, Rudel is correct. It is puzzling, though, that this brief attempt at establishing a theoretical framework was placed at the end of the book rather than at the beginning, where it might help the reader comprehend the contemporary significance of early radio.

Given its numerous errors and scant research, it is doubtful that academics will find anything of value in this book. The work is likewise unsuitable for students, as there are a number of other books that explore the same issues more thoroughly and accurately. For a casual reader with no knowledge of radio's rich and colorful history, *Hello Everybody!* might be successful at spurring future curiosity, though it is difficult to recommend the book for any other purpose.

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